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ABSTRACT

Based on results of a survey conducted at the 1979 National School Boards Association Convention, this report focuses on the channels, frequency, and topics of communication between board members and their constituents. A total of 759 board members completed the survey instrument. The data presented show that, on the whole, moderate levels of communication are the norm in districts throughout the nation. Direct contacts between board members and district residents do not absorb a large proportion of the time board members devote to the schools. Moreover, in most districts the media, particularly television, do not routinely report on a full range of school system activities or school board decisions. The board meetings themselves are not ordinarily attended by large numbers of citizens. Specific incidents change customary patterns of school board-community interactions. School boards tend to be more open to public participation when conflict and competition for board seats are high. Further, research suggests that when citizens' desires for involvement in school governance grow, they want more decentralization of decision-making, and they prefer board members to adopt the position of delegate--transmitting the public will into votes. (Author/MLF)

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School-Community Communication

School Board Members and Their Constituents

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School-Community Communication
School Board Members and Their Constituents

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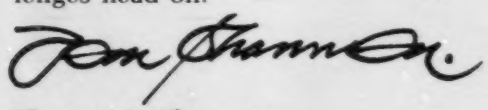
Foreword

The 1980s promise to be a decade of immense challenge for school boards as costs rise, budgets dwindle, teacher militancy increases, and enrollments decline. Board members cannot effectively meet the challenge alone; rather, they need to seek a stronger partnership with the communities they represent. Communication is crucial in establishing that relationship.

School-Community Communication focuses on the channels, frequency and topics of communication between board members and their constituents. We hope that school board members, by carefully considering this report's findings, will gain new insight into relations with their own communities and will be better prepared to meet their particular challenges head on.



Thomas A. Shannon
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Introduction

America's public schools have been governed by, and for, the people of the communities they serve. Thus, school boards have been lauded as representing democracy in action. Communication between board members and their constituents is a vital prerequisite to this democracy. For schools can be governed *by* the people only if citizens comprehend often-complex educational issues. And schools can be governed *for* the people only if board members are apprised of their constituents' wishes.

As parents continue to demand a stronger voice in their children's education—some, for example, demanding innovations while others are pressuring boards to return to the basics—communication becomes particularly important. For local boards to function effectively, board members, as representatives of the public, must assure parents their wishes will be given a fair hearing.

Moreover, some people argue the United States may be entering a period in which demands are so complex that it becomes impossible for any organization to plan *for* another group. "Participatory concensus"—the involvement of the public—may be necessary in order for organizations to achieve their goals.[1] Board members and administrators, then, should continue to include regular consultation with the public in their decision-making process.

Communication flows both from the representative to constituents, and from constituents to the representative. This report explores the ever-shifting current of this communication flow, as it examines:

- Why school board communication with the public is especially important today;
- The extent to which school board members perceive conflict between themselves and administrators, teachers, and students;
- How school board members define their roles as public representatives;
- How board members perceive the frequency, accuracy, and tone of mass media coverage of school districts and school board activities;
- Topics of public concern;
- School board meetings as vehicles of communicating with constituents.

This report is based on results of a survey conducted at the 1979 National School Boards Association Convention in Miami Beach. A total of 759 board members completed the survey instrument (see Appendix II). Characteristics of participants in this study are similar to those of board members nationally (see Appendix I). There is confidence, then, that their perceptions and experiences approximate those of school board members across the nation.

In addition to looking at the responses of the entire sample, several classifications of districts and of board members were used to determine whether these might account for differences in patterns of communication. District classifications include enrollment, region of the nation (see Appendix III), and type of district (rural, small town, suburban, or urban).[2] Age, sex, and number of years in office were used to classify board members.[3] Where differences by these categories were found, they are reported.

The Context of Communication

The processes, objectives, and effectiveness of communication are affected by a variety of factors. Among these are expectations and perceptions of the representatives themselves. If school board members believe communication with the public provides valuable information and that it is their job to translate public will into educational policies, communication likely will be a central focus of their tenure. On the other hand, board members who have strong personal convictions—and are skeptical of the validity of constituents' views—will be more likely to discount public and parental messages.

Perceptions of conflict

Board members make decisions affecting pupils, teachers, and school administrators. Most say their prime concern is pupil welfare, and in the ideal world the needs and desires of these groups would be complementary. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and board members increasingly are forced to choose courses of action that mediate conflicts among these groups. For example, to maintain teacher salaries, it might be necessary to curtail enrichment programs and extracurricular activities. In other words, as scarce resources are allocated, the best interests of all groups cannot be met *in toto*.

As Table 1 indicates, a substantial number (43%) of the responding board members feel conflict between their responsibility to the public and to school administrators or teachers. Approximately a third perceive conflict between their responsibility to the public and to students. Less than one-third of the board members believe the public is reasonably informed about the board's legal obligations. In general, the board members who have served in office longer hold a more positive opinion about the public's level of information.

What do these views suggest about the context within which communication occurs? They imply that even the best-intentioned, informed board member functions in an arena in which differences in objectives, opinions, and values exist. In such a context, misunderstandings and discord are bound to occur. Board members who understand the modes and contents of communication between themselves and the people they represent have taken a necessary step toward minimizing conflict and managing it when it does occur.

TABLE 1

The Context of Communication

Board members' feeling conflict between their responsibility to the public and their responsibility to:

	Often/ sometimes %	Rarely/ never %
Teachers	43	57
School administrators	43	57
Students	35	65

In your opinion, how well informed is the general public in your school district about the school board's:

	Highly/ reasonably %	Somewhat/ not informed %
Activities	53	47
Legal responsibilities	32	68

Perceptions of roles

Elected officials, who differ in their notions of how best to fulfill their representative function, generally fit into one of two major orientations: trustee or delegate. Those who adopt the trustee stance believe they should behave and vote according to their own best judgment; the trustee believes that the public, in voting him into office, has demonstrated support for his judgment and prior acceptance of his decisions. The delegate, on the other hand, thinks board members should transmit the will of the public into votes as if the people themselves were voting directly. Paul Blanchard reports that a majority of school board members accept the trustee role.[4] Board members in this study agree; more than two-thirds believe they should vote their own convictions, regardless of what the public may want.

Parenthetically it is noted that the method by which board members are selected has some effect on the distribution of delegate-trustee role orientations. Two-thirds of the board members selected through nonpartisan elections agree with the trustee orientation, while 90% of those appointed to office hold this view. Board members elected in partisan elections occupy a position midway between these two groups.

The fact that a substantial majority of board members adopt a trustee orientation to their role may be due to a number of factors, all of which point to the central role of communication. The board members surveyed appear somewhat skeptical about the level of accurate information the public has about board activities and responsibilities. Therefore, they may reason, it is up to them to make decisions based upon their best judgment. Second, the public may want something which board members believe is contrary to the best interests of students, teachers, or the administration. Greater knowledge of the consequences—even the legal possibility—of giving the public what it wants may convince board members to act in opposition to the perceived public will, particularly if the public's desire appears to be short-term. Finally, board members may make conscientious attempts to discover the public will, only to find it illusive and ill-defined.

Despite those limitations, on the whole board members believe they are doing a good job as representatives. More than four-fifths of the respondents believe their boards are doing an excellent or good job of representing the predominant views and opinions of citizens in their districts. Newer board members tend to be more critical of their boards' function as public representative. For example, 13% of the members in their first term say their board is doing an excellent job representing the public, while nearly one-third of those serving more than 10 years believe this to be the case.

Channels of Communication

To inform the public about what is happening in their schools, gather support for public education, and legitimize board decisions and policies, school boards use a variety of communication channels. This section examines those channels, turning first to the mass media—newspapers, radio, and television—and board members' perceptions of media accuracy and bias.

The mass media

How frequently do the mass media carry stories about the local school system? The medium most Americans rely on for their news—television—is least likely to provide regular coverage of school news. The data in Table 2 indicate that even the most diligent devotee of television news may encounter difficulty obtaining regular information about the school system. Nearly half the respondents report they have no local television station; of the 226 board members who come from districts with a local station, almost half (47%) report their stations carry school-related stories less than once a month. Barely a seventh (15%) report their stations provide accounts of schools several times during the month. Moreover, when extensive coverage is provided, its focus is likely to be a crisis: a teachers' strike, a court order for busing, or student violence. Unfortunately, this kind of coverage directs attention to episodic events and turmoil rather than to the daily tasks and achievements of education.

Media other than television are more frequent carriers of school-related information. For example, of the 435 board members from districts with local radio stations, nearly half (48%) report school-related stories are broadcast at least once a week. Almost all board members indicate their districts have local daily newspapers (only 8% of respondents come from districts with no local dailies), and school stories appear at least once a week in two-thirds of these papers. More than half the weekly newspapers carry school news in nearly every issue.

Regional variations in media coverage

Variations in media coverage exist among different types of districts and among regions of the country. Urban districts and districts in the Pacific and Southern regions tend to re-

TABLE 2

Frequency of Mass Media Coverage of School Systems

	Television %	Radio %	Daily Newspapers %	Weekly Newspapers %
Sev. times/week	7	22	30	—
1/week	7	15	35	57
1 or 2/month	12	23	22	24
Less than 1/month	24	18	4	6
Have no local media	49	21	8	13

ceive the most television coverage; still, fewer than a third of the board members from the most heavily populated, urban regions report television stories being aired at least once a week. Radio coverage is most extensive in urban areas, small towns, and in the South.

The Southern region benefits from the most frequent daily newspaper coverage: 77% of the board members from the South indicate at least one school-related story per week appears in their local papers. Urban districts also are the subjects of relatively frequent newspaper stories—at least one per week, according to 80% of the urban board members. About half (55%) of the board members from rural areas report such coverage. Districts most likely to be covered regularly in weekly newspapers are located predominantly in the Northeastern and Southern regions, and in suburban areas. Some 62% of the board members from these districts report weekly coverage. Except for the relatively heavy television coverage they receive, districts in the Pacific region are least apt to be the focus of the mass media.

The accuracy and tone of the media

The mass media are major sources of news and opinions for most Americans; to assess more fully their role in board-community communication, the accuracy and tone of mass media accounts of the schools were investigated. Board members were asked to indicate whether, in their views, media reporting of school board meetings and the school system is generally accurate or inaccurate, positive or negative. Table 3 depicts these perceptions.

Board meetings. More than 60% of the respondents believe the media are generally accurate in relating news about school board meetings, and 53% believe these stories are generally positive. Put the other way, more than one-third of the responding board members report the media are sometimes or nearly always inaccurate in their reporting of board meetings, and nearly one-half indicate stories

TABLE 3

Board Members' Perceptions of Media Accuracy and Bias

	Generally Accurate %	A Mixture %	Generally Inaccurate %
Board Meetings	62	34	4
School System	66	30	3
	Generally Positive %	**A Mixture %**	**Generally Negative %**
Board Meetings	53	42	4
School System	60	36	4

have at least some negative overtones. Nearly three-fourths of the board members from the Western and Pacific regions report press coverage of board meetings is generally accurate, and nearly two-thirds of them indicate the coverage is positive. In contrast, only one-half of the board members from the Northeast report accuracy, and less than 40% evaluate the coverage as positive.

School systems. Two-thirds of the board members perceive the media to be accurate in presenting information about the school system, and 60% say the coverage is generally positive in tone. Board members, then, perceive media coverage of their meetings to be less accurate and more critical than coverage of the school system in general.

It seems that the most positive news about school systems appears in the West; 75% of the respondents from that region indicate coverage is generally favorable. Half of the board members from the East share this view of coverage accorded their school systems. Furthermore, while some 60% of rural, small-town, and suburban board members say the media are generally positive toward their school systems, only 40% of the urban board members agree with this.

Mass media: conclusion

Survey results indicate that the media in the South and in urban areas most frequently carry news about school systems. Media in

the Western and Pacific regions are perceived as most accurate and positive in their stories. Residents of urban areas receive the most frequent news, but urban board members are more likely than their counterparts in suburban, small-town, and rural districts to report that the media presents inaccurate or negative news.

Because board members are more apt to report media coverage as being accurate than positive, they apparently acknowledge that at times criticisms of borad meetings or the school system are warranted. Indeed, thoughtful criticisms based on factual information can be fruitful sources of ideas for board members and administrators, and can add to their understanding of the schools' effect on their communities.

Board members as communicators

School board members communicate with numerous people and groups about day-to-day school business and broader school issues. To determine with whom board members talk most often, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they speak to a variety of individuals and groups who might be interested in—or affect—the local school district (Table 4).

Aside from the superintendent, board members are most likely to discuss schools with their friends and neighbors. Eighty percent of the respondents speak to these people at least three times a month, with 50% talking to them at least half a dozen times. Board members also communicate with parents; nearly two-thirds of the respondents speak with parents at least weekly. Likewise, school administrators, students, and teachers receive a share of board communications. But, at the opposite end of the spectrum, government officials and members of civic groups are unlikely to talk with board members.

Female board members and those from districts with more than 10,000 students are more apt to communicate frequently with large numbers of people. In their capacities as school board members, 61% of the women—compared to 47% of the men—communicate with friends and neighbors about school matters six or more times per month. Similarly, 43% of the women, and only 27% of the men, communicate six or more times per month with parents. The women also speak more frequently with teachers, students, neighborhood groups, and parent organizations.

The board members holding office two to three years are more likely to speak fre-

TABLE 4

Frequency of Board Member Communication With Various Groups

People or Groups	6+/ month %	3-5/ month %	1-2/ month %	Rarely/ Never %
Friends and neighbors	51	29	16	3
Parents	31	33	28	8
School administrators other than superintendent	25	31	36	9
Students	23	24	34	18
Teachers	19	29	37	15
Local press	10	18	40	31
Classified and custodial staff	8	15	38	40
Parent organizations (e.g., PTA)	4	11	43	42
Local government officials (e.g., city council members)	5	14	36	45
Civic associations and service clubs	3	8	34	54
Neighborhood groups	2	11	36	51
Members of state legislatures or staffs	2	6	38	54
State education officials	2	5	28	65
Members of U.S. Congress or their staffs	*	1	15	82
Other federal government officials	*	1	8	90

* Less than 1%

quently with the press than first-year members or individuals who have been on the board four or more years. On the other hand, first-year board members speak more frequently with teachers than do other board members. Nearly two-thirds of the newer board members communicate with teachers at least three times per month. Finally, the board members who have been in office longer than a decade are least likely to talk with their friends about schools; approximately one-third of these veteran board members communicate with friends less than once a month about school matters.

Some factors affecting communication

Some caution in interpreting the above findings is warranted. For example, the board members from districts with small enrollments may speak to the same proportion of their constituents as their colleagues who have larger populations to serve, a fact that cannot be determined on the basis of this survey. Also, some districts may have strongly developed norms shaping board behavior which inhibit board members from speaking out to formal community groups. Some boards expect superintendents and other administrators to serve as school spokespeople, even basing part of administrative evaluation on the effectiveness with which this public relations work is executed. Where the superintendent is an articulate, thoughtful exponent of board views, and where he devotes substantial time to communicating those views, board members may feel relieved of their obligations in this regard. Nevertheless, when board members themselves speak to various groups about the schools, opportunities for public input are provided, and board members can remain informed about what is on their constituents' minds.

The frequency of calls

Researchers have studied how often and for what reasons citizens communicate with their school boards. Harmon Zeigler and his colleagues examined eleven school districts over a nine-month period. In a close scrutiny of three of these districts, they found that when citizens did communicate with board members, they were asking for information rather than expressing opinions or demanding particular actions.[5] Among the eleven districts, the average board member received fewer than five private communications a week from the public.[6] Frederick Wirt concludes that on the whole, little participation by parents seems to be the norm in most school districts.[7]

On the average, the board members in this study receive some half a dozen calls per month from parents and two calls per month from the public about school-related matters. Board members from the South, urban districts, and districts with more than 25,000 students receive the largest number of calls from parents. Women board members receive a disproportionately high number of calls from parents. Board members from the West, rural areas, and districts with fewer than 1,000 pupils receive the fewest calls. These same patterns hold true for the number of calls board members receive from the general public.

Again, caution must be used in interpreting at least some of these findings. Obviously, large districts and urban districts serve more people, and the larger the number of constituents the greater the number of calls a board member is likely to receive. Yet, these findings underscore how infrequently parents and the public contact school board members; the data show board members receive from one-and-one-half to two calls per week. The board members in this study spend an average of 27 hours per month on school business, although a few spend as little as two hours per month, and some as much as 90 hours per month.[8] Apparently, little of that time is spent responding to constituents' calls.

On the agenda

Although the number of calls a board member receives is relatively small, the top-

ics discussed in those conversations probably are a good indication of the issues concerned citizens are thinking about.

Of concern. Table 5 lists topics that often are on the minds of parents and other people who call board members. Criticisms of the schools or school districts constitute the major reason for calls from both parents and the public. Conversely, 37% of the respondents report they often or sometimes receive calls from parents to praise the district, and 29% report receiving such calls from the public. Student discipline and board actions also generate a substantial number of calls from both parents and the public. The data illustrate that parents frequently are concerned about teachers' and students' performances, while financial issues are more important to the public-at-large.

In the headlines. Topics about which parents and the public do *not* call school board members are also of interest. Five topics frequently in the headlines were listed on the questionnaire and board members were asked how frequently school-related calls deal with each of these (Table 6). Topics that are high in news coverage and thought to be of major public concern—such as back-to-basics, collective bargaining, desegregation, drug use, and violence and vandalism—are not often reasons for parent and public contacts with the responding board members.

The trend to return to "basics" has received much national attention. Yet, although more than half the respondents receive calls concerning back to basics at least sometimes, the data suggest the magnitude of concern about this subject is not as great among parents or the public as the national publicity would imply—or citizens choose to direct their concerns to people other than their school board members. (It should be noted that some respondents may have interpreted the topic of student discipline, which is a relatively frequent subject of parental or public calls, to include violence and vandalism. If this is the case, the salience of violence and vandalism to parents and the public may be understated in these data.)

Variations in concerns. Rural-area parents are slightly more apt than parents in other types of districts to call board members about teacher performances, and the public in the Northeast is more prone than residents of other areas of the nation to call about school finances and expenditures. Regardless of the topic, parents and the public are more likely to call female than male board members.

The data suggest that parents in the Northeast are the group most concerned about col-

TABLE 5

Issues on Their Minds: Topics of Parent and Public Calls to Board Members

Issue	Respondents Receiving Calls Often or Sometimes %
From Parents	
Criticism of something in the district	70
Teacher performance	69
Student discipline	68
Comments on items discussed/acted on at last board meeting	57
Student academic performance	53
From the Public	
Criticism of something in the district	62
School finance/taxes	56
District expenditures	52
Student discipline	50

TABLE 6

Infrequent Topics of Parent and Public Calls to School Board Members

Issue	Respondents Who Often or Sometimes Receive Calls from:	
	Parents	Public
	%	%
Desegregation	8	7
Collective Bargaining	18	21
Violence and vandalism	31	31
Use of drugs by students/staff	33	31
"Back to basics"	53	51

lective bargaining, drugs, and school closings. The board members from the South and from urban areas receive more calls about desegregation than those from other areas and types of districts.

Board members as communicators: conclusion

The data presented in this section reflect limited interaction between the school board members and their various constituents—including community groups, parents, school personnel other than the superintendent, and the general public. Moreover, this pattern apparently exists regardless of region, enrollment, or type of district. And characteristics of the board members themselves—their role orientations (delegate or trustee), length of service on the board, and age—do not typically affect their modes of communication.

Contacts the board members do have with their constituents provide opportunities for exchange of information and opinions about local education. While districts undoubtedly differ from each other, and in some districts a particular issue may be especially salient and controversial, the data suggest that, in general, citizens' concerns are uniform throughout the nation.

Subjects about which parents and the public appear most concerned, as measured by the board members' assessments of the topics they communicate about, are not always the same as the subjects receiving national attention. For example, parents do not frequently express concern about school finances, and neither the public nor parents place back to basics at the forefront of their agendas. Moreover, the topics board members deal with most often are generally not those about which constituents express interest.[9] This helps explain why board members perceive a relatively low level of understanding of board activities and responsibilities on the part of their constituents. This limited public understanding can become a problem when events force the public to take notice; in the case of a sudden financial crisis or a teachers' strike, for instance. In these situations, it is likely that long-term public awareness and knowledge of the issues will not exist; public reactions, therefore, will not be tempered by background information and historical understanding.

The board meeting

The most public channel through which school boards make their views known and receive community input is the school board meeting. In their nine-month study of eleven school districts, Harvey J. Tucker and Harmon Zeigler concluded that boards respond to initiatives of administrators or the staff—not the public—and that the public comments on less than a fourth of the agenda items.[10] Tucker and Zeigler further determined that, contrary to most decision-making bodies, school boards make their decisions in formal meetings, usually by unanimous votes.

The diversity and numbers of people who attend school board meetings (Table 7) are indicative of several aspects of school governance. Community interest in the board's activities and actions, levels of controversy on specific agenda items, and the degree to which the community believes "real" decisions are made at open meetings are some factors affecting attendance at board meetings.

TABLE 7

Who Attends School Board Meetings

	Average # of people	Maximum # of people
Citizens	12.0	More than 100
District administrators	4.6	60
Other district staff (including teachers)	3.5	99
Students	1.8	40
Media representatives	1.8	20

Respondents to the NSBA survey indicate that while in some cases the typical audience well exceeds 100, on the average fewer than 25 people are present for board deliberations and decision-making. Given that a number of these may be required to attend board meetings as part of their jobs (district administrators and members of the press, for example), the number of interested citizens who are present at board meetings is small. As expected, urban districts and those with more than 25,000 pupils have the largest audiences at board meetings, while meetings in rural districts and in districts with fewer than 1,000 pupils attract the smallest number of observers. Generally, few people attend board meetings in the West. The media are most apt to attend meetings in the Southern region; this is consistent with the finding previously mentioned that the South enjoys relatively extensive news coverage compared with the rest of the nation. Citizens attend board meetings most frequently in the Northeastern districts, and administrators are present in large numbers in the Pacific region.

As indicated in Table 7, students visit board meetings infrequently. Even in the largest districts, fewer than six students generally attend meetings. Twenty-four percent of the board members in this sample report that students regularly attend meetings. Fewer than 10% report that students often speak at these meetings, while two-thirds of the board members rarely or never hear from students at meetings.

Implications

The data presented here suggest school board meetings typically are the province of board members, superintendents, and a few interested constituents. Only in cases of severe conflict are residents of the district likely to converge on a board meeting, and even then their attendance may have been orchestrated carefully, to imply to the board that a mass of concerned citizenry exists. Boards voting to close a school, for example, have encountered large crowds of disturbed parents at the meeting at which that issue is on the agenda or at the meeting immediately following the board action; attendance declines soon after a final decision is made. Indeed, unusually large attendance may signal a need for the public to "let off steam," to vent anger and confusion in public, before retreating back to the role of passive citizenry.

Minimal attendance at board meetings does not necessarily imply lack of public concern about the schools or lack of board concern for the public. Rather, board members and school administrators perhaps establish alternative means through which the public feels a part of district governance. Constituents, therefore, may not always perceive board meetings to be extremely important. In any case, board members who are concerned about low attendance may wish to ask themselves some questions about their meetings: Are agenda available? Are the acoustics adequate? Do board members refrain from making long speeches? Are meetings held at convenient times and locations? The answers to these questions may provide a clue to the reasons behind poor attendance.

Why the poor attendance on the part of high school students, who can gain not only an understanding of school policies, but first-hand exposure to local government by attending board meetings? Students' failure to take advantage of this opportunity may be due to the fact that they often express views to the board through intermediaries such as principals or other administrators. It also may be that students do not comprehend the full range of board authority and responsibility, or do not have confidence in their own abilities to express themselves.

To repeat, low attendance at school board meetings does not by itself signify that public involvement in school governance is moribund, nor is high attendance a sufficient sign that participation exists.

Other means of communication

By defeating incumbent board members at elections, scholars suggest, citizens are sending a message that they are dissatisfied with current school policies and practices.[11] Frequently, new boards respond to this expression of dissatisfaction by replacing the superintendent. The primary proponents of this view, Frank W. Lutz and Lawrence Iannaccone, argue that, according to their definition of participation and public control, school districts are responsive to the public.

Others agree that the ballot box is a primary mechanism for public communication and control of school districts, but differ about the effectiveness of elections. Harmon Zeigler and M. Kent Jennings maintain that the limited competition for board seats and increasing reliance on superintendents for information and ideas have limited the ability of the public and even of board members to participate fully in school governance.[12]

Still others find community-school communication focusing on the interaction between administrators and the public.[13] Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst believe the consequences of public communication and participation are best investigated by looking at decisions made (i.e., determining whether officials act according to the wants and needs of their constituents).[14]

Summary

This report has one underlying premise: frequent and open exchanges of information and opinions will mutually benefit school board members and their constituents. Communication minimizes misunderstandings and conflicts, thereby clearing the path to the achievement of shared goals.

The data presented in the report show that, on the whole, moderate levels of communication are the norm in districts throughout the nation. Direct contacts between board members and district residents do not absorb a large proportion of the time board members devote to the schools. Moreover, in most districts represented in this study the media, particularly television, do not routinely report on a full range of school system activities or school board decisions. And the board meetings themselves are not ordinarily attended by large numbers of citizens, who might use such attendance as a method of remaining informed about the schools or expressing their own concerns.

Specific incidents change customary patterns of school board-community interactions. For instance, school boards tend to be more open to public participation when conflict and competition for board seats are high.[15] Further, research suggests that when citizens' desires for involvement in school governance grow, they want more decentralization of decision-making, and they prefer board members to adopt the position of delegate—transmitting the public will into votes.[16] It can be surmised that when people want board members to act as delegates, these citizens have particular attitudes they wish to transmit into policy.

Accommodating the diverse demands of school districts is a delicate task, and school board members need to insure that they make best use of all available tools to accomplish their goals. Communication with the district is one of these tools.

Appendix I: The Sample

Characteristics of Board Members Nationally and Survey Respondents

	National %	Survey Respondents %
Sex		
Male	74.1[a]	70.6
Female	25.9	29.4
Income (annual)		
Less than $20,000	26.1[a]	15.8
$20,000–$29,999	32.8	30.0
$30,000–$39,999	18.7	25.3
More than $40,000	22.4	28.9
Student population of district		
Less than 1,000	17.0[a]	13.1
1,000–4,999	47.3	49.7
5,000–9,999	19.0	16.4
10,000–24,999	11.0	14.5
More than 25,000	5.0	6.0
Type of district		
Rural	31.5[b]	28.8
Small town	21.2	28.0
Suburban	33.3	31.6
Urban	10.8	11.7
Other	3.2	—

[a] Source: Kenneth Underwood and George Umberger, "A Profile of the School Board Member," *American School Board Journal*, October 1978, pp. 23-24.

[b] Source: Educational Research Service, *Research Digest*, March 1979.

Appendix II: The Questionnaire

1979 NSBA Convention Survey

Dear 1979 NSBA Convention Attendee:

Each year, through surveys such as this, NSBA attempts to learn more about the operations of school boards so that we can better understand and serve your needs. Please be candid. This questionnaire is anonymous.

Please return your completed questionnaire to an usher as you leave this session. If this is not possible, please return your questionnaire to the NSBA Information Booth in the Registration area or to the NSBA Booth #723 on the Exhibit floor. Thank you.

Very truly yours,

Thomas A. Shannon
Executive Director

(1-4)

(5) 1. Including this one, how many NSBA conventions have you attended? _____

(6) 2. What is your position in your school district?

[1]☐ School Board Member
[2]☐ Superintendent
[3]☐ Other (specify) _____

(7-8) 3. How long have you served in your present position? _____ years

If you checked "Superintendent" or "Other" in Question #2, please skip Questions #4 through #11

(9-10) 4. In which year did you last seek election/appointment to the board? 19__

(11-12) 5. Approximately how many hours per month do you spend on matters related to the school board (including meetings, reading, school visitations, public relations, etc.)? _____ hours

(13) 6. As a board member, do you feel conflict between your responsibility to the public and your responsibility to the school administration?

[1]☐ Often
[2]☐ Sometimes
[3]☐ Rarely
[4]☐ Never

(14) 7. As a board member, do you feel conflict between your responsibility to the public and your responsibility to the teachers?

[1]☐ Often
[2]☐ Sometimes
[3]☐ Rarely
[4]☐ Never

(15) 8. As a board member, do you feel conflict between your responsibility to the public and your responsibility to students?

[1]☐ Often
[2]☐ Sometimes
[3]☐ Rarely
[4]☐ Never

(16) 9. When your present term expires do you plan to

[1]☐ Seek re-election or reappointment?
[2]☐ Retire from the board?
[3]☐ Don't know?

(17) 10. Are there any other governmental positions -- local, state or federal - that you would like to hold?

[1]☐ Yes [2]☐ No [3]☐ Not sure

11. If YES, what position(s) would you be interested in? (Check no more than 3)

(18) ☐ City/town councilperson
(19) ☐ Mayor
(20) ☐ State legislator
(21) ☐ Governor
(22) ☐ U.S. Representative
(23) ☐ U.S. Senator
(24) ☐ Other (Specify) _____

(25-29) 12. How many students are enrolled in your school district? _____

(30-31) 13. In what state is your school district located? _____

(32) 14. How do your district's 1977-78 per-pupil expenditures compare with all districts in your state?

[1]☐ In the top third
[2]☐ In the middle third
[3]☐ In the bottom third
[4]☐ Don't know

(33) 15. Would you describe your school district as predominantly *(Check the one that most precisely describes your district.)*

[1]☐ Rural
[2]☐ Small town
[3]☐ Suburban
[4]☐ Urban

(34) 16. Are members of your district's school board

[1]☐ Elected in partisan elections?
[2]☐ Elected in non-partisan elections?
[3]☐ Appointed? (Appointed by whom? _____)

17. Number of women _____ (35-36) and men _____ (37-38) on your board.

(39-40) 18. How many years comprise a full term of board service in your district?

_____years.

19. Approximately how many people from each of these groups are present at a typical school board meeting?

	Number Attending	
Media representatives	____	(41-42)
Citizens	____	(43-44)
Students	____	(45-46)
District Administrators	____	(47-48)
Other District Staff	____	(49-50)
Other (Specify) _____	____	(51-52)

(53) 20. Are your board meetings covered by a state "sunshine" (open meetings) law?

[1]☐ Yes [2]☐ No [3]☐ Don't know

(54) 21. Does a student attend your regular board meetings, either as an ex-officio member or regular observer?

[1]☐ Yes [2]☐ No

(55) 22. How often do students speak at regular board meetings?

[1]☐ Often
[2]☐ Sometimes
[3]☐ Rarely
[4]☐ Never

(56) 23. There are two basic points of view about how a school board member should act when making a decision. Which of these two views comes <u>closest</u> to your general view? *(Check one.)*

[1]☐ Vote as the public wants, regardless of personal convictions
[2]☐ Vote one's own conviction, regardless of what the public may want

(57) 24. In your opinion, how good a job does the school board in your district do when it comes to representing the predominant views and opinions of citizens in your district?

[1]☐ Excellent
[2]☐ Good
[3]☐ Fair
[4]☐ Poor
[5]☐ Don't know

(58) 25. In your opinion, how well informed is the general public in your school district about the school board's legal responsibilities?

[1]☐ Highly informed
[2]☐ Reasonably informed
[3]☐ Somewhat informed
[4]☐ Not informed

(59) 26. In your opinion, how well informed is the general public in your school district about the school board's activities?

[1]☐Highly informed
[2]☐Reasonably informed
[3]☐Somewhat informed
[4]☐Not informed

27. In a given month, how often do you normally communicate with the following people or groups in your role as a board member or superintendent? *(Please check the appropriate box for each of the items listed below.)*

	6 or more times/mo.	3-5 times per mo.	1-2 times per mo.	rarely or never	
Civic associations and service clubs	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(60)
Neighborhood groups	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(61)
Parents	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(62)
Parent organizations (eg., PTA)	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(63)
Local press	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(64)
Friends and neighbors	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(65)
Students	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(66)
State education officials	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(67)
School administrators other than superintendent (eg., principals)	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(68)
Teachers	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(69)
Classified and custodial staff	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(70)
Local government officials (eg., city council members)	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(71)
Members of U.S. Congress or their staffs	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(72)
Other federal government officials	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(73)
Members of your state legislature or their staffs	[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	(74)

28. On average, how often do parents and the public call or visit at home or work about school-related matters?

Parents

(75) [1]☐ 5 or more times/week [2]☐ 3-4 times/week [3]☐ 1-2 times/week [4]☐ 1-2 times/month [5]☐ less than once/month

Public

(76) [1]☐ 5 or more times/week [2]☐ 3-4 times/week [3]☐ 1-2 times/week [4]☐ 1-2 times/month [5]☐ less than once/month

(80=1)

29. When parents and the public communicate with you, how often do they deal with the following issues? Please circle the appropriate number for each item at left. Use the scale:

1 = often 2 = sometimes 3 = rarely 4 = never

	Parents		Public	
Administrative performance	1 2 3 4	(5)	1 2 3 4	(27)
Attendance boundaries	1 2 3 4	(6)	1 2 3 4	(28)
"Back to basics"	1 2 3 4	(7)	1 2 3 4	(29)
Closing schools	1 2 3 4	(8)	1 2 3 4	(30)
Collective bargaining	1 2 3 4	(9)	1 2 3 4	(31)
Comments on items discussed/ acted on at last board meeting	1 2 3 4	(10)	1 2 3 4	(32)
Curriculum content	1 2 3 4	(11)	1 2 3 4	(33)
Desegregation	1 2 3 4	(12)	1 2 3 4	(34)
Items for the next board agenda	1 2 3 4	(13)	1 2 3 4	(35)
Standardized testing	1 2 3 4	(14)	1 2 3 4	(36)
District expenditures	1 2 3 4	(15)	1 2 3 4	(37)
School finance/taxes	1 2 3 4	(16)	1 2 3 4	(38)
Student discipline	1 2 3 4	(17)	1 2 3 4	(39)
Student transportation	1 2 3 4	(18)	1 2 3 4	(40)
Student academic performance	1 2 3 4	(19)	1 2 3 4	(41)
Teacher performance	1 2 3 4	(20)	1 2 3 4	(42)
Textbook selection	1 2 3 4	(21)	1 2 3 4	(43)
To criticize something in the district.	1 2 3 4	(22)	1 2 3 4	(44)
To praise something in the district	1 2 3 4	(23)	1 2 3 4	(45)
Use of drugs by students/staff	1 2 3 4	(24)	1 2 3 4	(46)
Violence and vandalism	1 2 3 4	(25)	1 2 3 4	(47)
Other (explain)_____	1 2 3 4	(26)	1 2 3 4	(48)

(49) 30. In the past 12 months has your school district held a tax or bond referendum?
[1]☐ Yes [2]☐ No

(50) 31. If you answered YES to Question #33, how many referenda were held in the past 12 months? _____

(51) How many of these were passed? _____

32. How often do the daily local media carry stories about the school system?

	Television	Radio	Newspaper(s)
Several times a week	[1]☐	[1]☐	[1]☐
Once a week	[2]☐	[2]☐	[2]☐
Once or twice a month	[3]☐	[3]☐	[3]☐
Less than once a month	[4]☐	[4]☐	[4]☐
We have no local daily media	[5]☐	[5]☐	[5]☐
	(52)	(53)	(54)

(55) 33. How often does the weekly newspaper(s)/magazine(s) carry stories about the school system?

[1]☐ Every week or almost every week
[2]☐ Once or twice a month
[3]☐ Less than once a month
[4]☐ We have no weekly newspaper(s)/magazine(s)

34. Please use the two scales below to assess media reporting and coverage of your board meetings. *(Check one number for each scale.)*

(56)

Generally Accurate		Generally a Mixture		Generally Inaccurate
[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	[5]☐

(57)

Generally Positive		Generally a Mixture		Generally Negative
[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	[5]☐

35. Please use the two scales below to assess media reporting and coverage of your school system. *(Check one number for each scale.)*

(58)

Generally Accurate		Generally a Mixture		Generally Inaccurate
[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	[5]☐

(59)

Generally Positive		Generally a Mixture		Generally Negative
[1]☐	[2]☐	[3]☐	[4]☐	[5]☐

(60) 36. What is your sex? [1]☐ Male [2]☐ Female

(61-62) 37. What is your age? _____ years

(63) 38. In what range does your family's annual gross income fall?

[1]☐ $ 0 -$ 4,999
[2]☐ $ 5,000-$ 9,999
[3]☐ $10,000-$19,999
[4]☐ $20,000-$29,999
[5]☐ $30,000-$39,999
[6]☐ $40,000-$49,999
[7]☐ $50,000-$59,999
[8]☐ $60,000 or more

(64) 39. In your opinion, how important is it for the schools to provide students with opportunities to learn occupational skills?

[1]☐ Very important
[2]☐ Important
[3]☐ Not too important
[4]☐ Not at all important
[5]☐ Undecided; don't know

(65) 40. Do you think the schools in your district should give more or less emphasis to career preparation through vocational education programs?

[1]☐ More emphasis
[2]☐ Present emphasis is appropriate
[3]☐ Less emphasis
[4]☐ Undecided; not familiar enough to judge

If you answered MORE, why do you feel there should be more emphasis?

_____

_____

_____

If you answered LESS, why do you feel there should be less emphasis?

_____

_____

_____

(66) 41. In your opinion, how well do the vocational programs offered in your school district prepare young people for jobs?

[1]☐ Very well
[2]☐ Well
[3]☐ Not too well
[4]☐ Not well at all
[5]☐ Undecided; don't know
[6]☐ We don't offer any vocational education programs

(80-2)

Appendix III: Definitions of Regions

Central
Illinois
Indiana
Iowa
Kentucky
Michigan
Minnesota
Missouri
Ohio
Wisconsin

Western
Colorado
Kansas
Montana
Nebraska
New Mexico
North Dakota
Oklahoma
South Dakota
Wyoming

Pacific
Alaska
Arizona
California
Hawaii
Idaho
Nevada
Oregon
Utah
Washington

Northeast
Connecticut
Delaware
Maine
Maryland
Massachusetts
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New York
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
Vermont

Southern
Alabama
Arkansas
Florida
Georgia
Louisiana
Mississippi
North Carolina
South Carolina
Tennessee
Texas
Virginia
West Virginia

Notes

[1] Fred G. Burke, "Comments," in Samuel K. Gove and Frederick M. Wirt, eds., *Political Science and School Politics*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Health & Co., 1976, p. 66.

[2] Enrollment was broken into five categories: fewer than 1000, 1000-4999, 5000-9999, 10,000-24,999, and above 25,000. Board members indicated whether their districts were predominantly rural, small town, etc. While most large districts are also urban, and most small ones are rural, the two measures are not completely correlated. For example, some suburban districts have a relatively small enrollment (1000-4999), even though the district is in a heavily populated geographic area.

[3] Ages were divided into the following categories: up to age 19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60 or above. Length of service on the board was categorized first year, 2-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-10 years, and 11 or more years.

[4] Paul D. Blanchard, "Most School Board Members are Their Own Men," *The American School Board Journal* 161 (1974).

[5] Harmon Zeigler, Harvey J. Tucker, and L. A. Wilson II, "Communication and Decision Making in American Public Education: A Longitudinal and Comparative Study," in Jay D. Scribner, ed., *The Politics of Education, The 76th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

[6] Harvey J. Tucker and Harmon Zeigler, "Responsiveness in Public School Districts: A Comparative Analysis of Boards of Education," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 3 (1978), 213-237.

[7] Frederick M. Wirt, "Political Turbulence and Administrative Authority in the Schools," in Louis H. Masotti and Robert L. Lineberry, eds., *The New Urban Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1976.

[8] Women spend significantly more time than do the men in this sample. On the average, the women spend 34 hours per month on board business, while men average 25 hours per month. Women are also newer members of school boards than their male colleagues; 61% of the women in this sample are in their first three years of board service, while 38% of the men are in their first three years. Conversely, 36% of the men, and only 12% of the women, have served on their boards seven or more years.

[9] For a discussion of concerns board members actually deal with see Paul Blanchard, *New School Board Members: A Portrait*. Research Report 1979-1, Washington, D.C.: National School Boards Association, 1979.

[10] Tucker and Zeigler, "Responsiveness in Public School Districts . . . "

[11] Frank W. Lutz and Lawrence Iannaccone, eds., *Public Participation in Local School Districts*. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1978.

[12] Zeigler and Jennings, *Governing American Schools*. North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1974.

[13] Dale Mann, *The Politics of Administrative Representation*. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976.

[14] Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst, *The Political Web of American Schools*. Boston: Little Brown, 1972.

[15] Leigh Stelzer, "Institutionalizing Conflict Response: The Case of Schoolboards," *Social Science Quarterly* 55 (1974), 380-393.

[16] Frank W. Lutz and Frederick W. Garnon, "Citizen Participation Preference in Educational Decisions," paper delivered at American Educational Research Association Convention, Toronto, Canada, March 27-31, 1978.